



THE MILLIONAIRE GIRL

Or the Parmenter Millions

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CHAPTER I. The Heiress to Millions.

It would have been difficult to find a happier girl in the whole county of Oxfordshire, or indeed, in the whole of England, than Olive Parmenter, the heiress of Gregory Parmenter's millions, as she sat in the rosey of Silverbeech on the morning of her birthday, a lovely day in June.

She was reading a letter from her lover, and letting it fall on her lap, leaned back smiling in response to the thoughts which the letter had produced.

Almost everything that a girl could wish for in life was hers. No one questioned her claim to beauty. A little above the middle height, she had a supple figure of exquisite mould, with the free carriage of perfect balance, every movement and gesture being inspired by natural grace. Her face was as beautiful as her form. Her broad forehead, white as alabaster, was surrounded by a wealth of wavy chestnut hair; dark, almost black, eyebrows and lashes shaded eyes of the deepest blue—a striking contrast; and her features, although delicately chiselled, were eloquent of character, self-reliance and strength.

Now and again a troubled expression flitted across her face and drew her brows together. This was at the thought of her one care—her father's health.

Her mother's death, some years before, had deeply affected Mr. Parmenter, and he had brought his wealth and only child to the rosey of Silverbeech, and seeking to forget his sorrow in the complete change of scene and life.

But the long, strenuous life in a hot climate spent in amassing his huge fortune had told on a none too robust constitution, and the blow of his wife's death was one from which he had never entirely recovered. His life was now centred in Olive, whom he loved passionately, a love which she returned with her whole heart; but he knew that days were numbered and his one great desire was to see her happily married before the end came. And that desire was now close to realization.

During the previous year the doctors had sent him to Naheim on account of his heart trouble, and, disliking everything that savoured of ostentation, he had scrupulously refrained from letting the fact of his enormous wealth be known. At the same hotel was staying a young soldier, Lieutenant John Fenwick, who had been invalided home from the South African War, and was recruiting his health before taking a position at the Foreign Office. The two young people were thrown much together, and were in love with each other before the handsome young soldier knew that Olive was the only child of the millionaire owner of Silverbeech, and Olive learned that Jack was the son and heir of Lord Belborough, whose castle and lands lay so close to her home.

It was a love match in the fullest sense, and Mr. Parmenter had gladly given his consent. But some difficulties had come from the other side; and now on her birthday Jack had written to say that he was coming over with great and glad news.

She guessed what it was, and her heart warmed and her cheek flushed with delightful anticipation.

"Jack has won over his mother at last," she told herself, her very veins tingling with delight at the thought; and she picked up the letter to read it for the twentieth time when a footstep on a path near broke in upon her reverie.

She glanced around and rose with an instinctive shudder of dislike as a man of about thirty years of age, with dark, handsome, strong features and bold, compelling brown eyes, raised his hat and bowed, saying with a confident smile:

"I wished to be first with my greetings, Miss Parmenter, and when I saw you in the rosey I ventured to come straight here instead of going first to the house. May I wish you many, many happy returns of the day?"

"Thank you, Mr. Merridew," she replied, giving him her hand and withdrawing it instantly. "My father is in the house."

"I came to see you, please, I wish you to do me a great service."

"Yes?" She did not resume her seat, but stood as if expecting him to leave her.

"I have something of great importance to say to you. Please sit down again."

After a moment's hesitation she did as he asked, and he drew a garden chair close to hers and took a case out of his pocket.

"First, I wish you to allow me to offer you a slight birthday tribute of my regard. This little trinket,"

and he took out a costly and beautiful brooch of brilliant.

"Thank you very much for your kind thought, but really I could not accept it," she said firmly, with a very decided shake of the head, "I could not."

He frowned and his eyes showed anger. "Why not?"

"It is impossible, Mr. Merridew, really, I could not think of it."

"You must take it," he said, fixing his keen, audacious eyes on her, "or I

shall think I have offended you—and I would not do that for the whole world," he added in a low, earnest voice.

She both disliked and distrusted him. He had come quite recently to Silverbeech, and having rendered a slight service to her father when he had been taken ill during a drive, and had been asked to Silverbeech, where he had given it to be understood that he was a wealthy American. He had since pestered Olive with attentions, which were profoundly unwelcome, but had never before taken such a liberty as this.

"I can give you no other answer, Mr. Merridew," she said, and rose.

"In America, such offerings are quite usual, Miss Parmenter," he persisted, rising also.

"We are not in America. But in any case I could not think of it."

He laid the case down. "Don't go, please, and please listen to me a minute, Miss Parmenter—Olive—I wish to have the right to give you such things," he said. He spoke in a deep, vibrating tone, and fixed on her a look of intense feeling.

She paused and bit her lip and then met his gaze frankly.

"I won't affect to misunderstand you, Mr. Merridew, but—"

He took her hand and interrupted her, speaking passionately. "I cannot keep silent any longer. I love you, Olive. I want you for my wife. I cannot live without you."

"Let me go at once, Mr. Merridew," she cried quickly, trying to withdraw her hand from his grasp.

"Not until you have heard me," he answered doggedly. "You must see for yourself how I love you. It is the one passion of my life, the love of a man who has never before cared even to look into a woman's eyes. You must be my wife."

"Will you release me, or must I call for help?"

"For God's sake!" he cried. He released her hand then, and the strenuous pressure of his fingers had left its marks on her white flesh.

She drew away and stood a moment nursing the hand he had gripped so violently. "I am sorry this has occurred, Mr. Merridew; but you must never again even hint at such a thing. Although you have not been here long, you must know that I am about engaged to Mr. Fenwick."

"The heir to a peerage!" he exclaimed with a curl of the lip and a shrug of anger.

"The man I love, Mr. Merridew," answered Olive proudly. "Will you please spare me the pain of prolonging this scene?"

"He is little more than a boy. What can he know of love?" he burst out. "I would lay down by life for you, and I will not see you sacrificed. You ought to know that only your money will induce his family to countenance such a marriage."

"You forget yourself. I am going to the house," said Olive curtly, and turned away.

But he seized her hand again and spoke with mounting vehemence. "What chance of happiness will you have with his family? You know how marriage is regarded by such people. His fancy will pass in a month; your wealth will have redeemed their pawned estates, and then you will be a mere thing of sunderance with them. It is only your money they seek. His mother, Lady Belborough, has said as much."

Olive's face was set and a flush of anger mounted to her cheeks. "Do you mean to force me to call the servants to protect me from your insults and violence?" she asked.

"Every word I say is true. Trample on my love if you will, but you shall not be tricked for want of a word of warning from me. I am willing to meet Lady Belborough and repeat to her face what I have just said to you."

For a moment the two stood staring fixedly into each other's eyes, and then her name was called. "Olive!"

"I am here Jack, the rosey," she called in answer. Then to her companion. "You will have an opportunity now. Here is Mr. Fenwick himself."

He frowned and let her hand fall as a tall, frank handsome fellow, with fair, frank handsome features, came hurrying up. He took Olive's hand with a bright smile, and gave her companion a curt, unfriendly nod.

"I thought you were hiding from me, Olive," he said with a smile.

"Mr. Merridew was detaining me, Jack. Now, sir," she added, with a note of challenge in her voice.

Merridew had no lack of courage, and took up the challenge instantly. "I was telling, Miss Parmenter, Mr. Fenwick, that I heard your mother say in regard to her, that she was only to be tolerated as a possible wife for you because of her father's millions."

Jack started as if he had been struck. "Is this fellow trying to part us, Olive?"

Merridew answered for himself. "I asked Miss Parmenter to honor me with her hand; and when she refused I thought she ought to know the truth about your mother's feelings in the matter. I am willing to repeat it in your hearing."

"Look here," began Jack angrily, clenching his fists. Then he checked himself. "Haven't you better clear out?" he said.

"You cannot deny what I have said,"

"It is too contemptible to need denial, Jack!" cried Olive hastily. "Your loyalty does you honor, Miss Parmenter," sneered Merridew. "And that loyalty will be put to a severe test when it turns out, as it may, that you are as poor as—as Lord Belborough himself."

"You are getting on my nerves," declared Jack. "Go before I lose my temper."

"Please go, Mr. Merridew."

"Yes, I will go. If I caused you offense, Miss Parmenter, at least believe I had no motive but your welfare. When you and others know what I know already, you will understand that, and will perhaps heed my warning. For myself I shall never cease to hope for a different answer from that which you gave him just now," and with that he raised his hat and left them.

"I always did hate that fellow," exclaimed Jack with a breath of relief. "And you really mean he had the cheek to ask you to marry him? The brute!"

But Olive looked very thoughtful and shuddered.

"I am not afraid of much, Jack, but I do believe I could be afraid of Gilbert Merridew. What do you suppose he meant?"

"Nothing! But I could almost wish it were true. People would then have no excuse for chattering about my marrying you for your money."

"Jack!" protested Olive, laying her hand on his arm.

"I'd like a test of the sort. Do you know what I'd do? I'd cut the Foreign Office and chuck the title and everything and just carry you off to some-

where where I could work for you as you deserve. Where love and honesty and work are not bound round by these bestial conventionalities; where they reckon a man for what he is and does, and not by the miserable handle to his name."

And then came lover's talk. Jack told his great news, which was what Olive anticipated—that the engagement was sanctioned. He brought out the ring and placed it on her finger, and for a long time the world was forgotten by them both in that wondrous harmony of young love which no man or woman has ever yet understood or can ever recall without a thrill of emotion.

Then together they went to tell Mr. Parmenter the news. And when he heard it he brought a deeper tint to Olive's cheeks and delighted Jack when with a smile, he declared: "There is only one thing now. I shall consent only on one condition—that the marriage take place within a month."

Olive cried out in dismayed protest; but he would take no refusal. A month at the outside or never! he threatened laughingly, and Jack gladly joined in urging her. Olive at first broke away, declaring in flaming protest that it was impossible; but turned again, and with her heart in her eyes as she looked at her lover, nodded her head in agreement; and then buried her face on her father's neck.

And thus it was settled that they

should be man and wife within the month.

CHAPTER II.
The "Honorable" Mrs. Taunton.

Gilbert Merridew was by no means downcast over his refusal by Olive. He had not anticipated any other result; and he had made the proposal only as a step toward the object he had in view.

That object was to secure Mr. Parmenter's millions; and the first and obvious course had been to attempt to gain Olive's hand in marriage. He was not a man to be daunted by difficulties or stayed by such a check; and he had other and infinitely more powerful weapons with which to continue the attack.

As soon as he had heard of Olive's love for Jack Fenwick, he knew that his suit was certain to fail, and that the lover must first be removed from his path.

He had already made one attempt to do this; and although that had failed for the time, he was quite confident of ultimate success in that direction also.

Knowing that Lady Belborough disliked Olive, he had manoeuvred so that a very pretty and attractive American woman, known as the Hon. Mrs. Taunton, who was reputed to be an enormously wealthy widow, but was, in reality, a confederate of his own and a decoy in a number of disreputable schemes, should ingratiate herself with the castle people, and affect to be in love with Jack.

The schemes had succeeded to a point,

only alternative. Come over immediately, Gilbert."

As soon as that had been dispatched, he hailed a hansom and told the man to drive him to Markham Street, Mayfair.

It was here that the "Hon." Mrs. Taunton lived in a residence all the appointments of which were suggestive of great wealth. The furniture was luxurious, the servants numerous, and the whole establishment in keeping with the lady's reputation as the possessor of millions of dollars.

The greeting between them was more than cordial. As much as Gilbert Merridew could care for any one but himself, he loved her; and she returned his love. They were tacitly engaged to be married; and some day they would be man and wife; but they both understood that that day could not dawn until they had made the fortune which would give them in reality the wealth which at present they only appeared to possess. They both loved the good things of the world too much to sacrifice them by marriage.

That he should have attempted to win Olive for his wife had been part of their plans; for although it was not admitted in so many words, they had both understood that, had he been successful, Olive would not have lived long as an obstacle between them.

"I know all about it, Gilbert," said Mrs. Taunton, with a smile. "I had a letter from Lady Belborough this morning telling me she had been forced to agree to the son's marriage with Olive Parmenter. She is full of regrets. What are you going to do?"

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